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Run Hugs, Squeeze Hugs, and Jump Hugs: Playfully Professing Parenthood and the Self- in-Relation

Marc Ouellette

Pascal just turned six. His sister, Jocelyne, is eight. Pascal likes loaders, planes, diggers, garbage trucks, tractors, dump trucks, and trains and skates fearlessly. Jocelyne likes all things pink and purple, Barbies, her Playmobil dollhouse/mansion, princess tiaras, frilly dresses, unicorns, and all things small and fluffy, like kittens; she is sometimes afraid of falling and hitting the ice, which impedes her skating progress. Yet, they both love run hugs, squeeze hugs, and jump hugs. The first involves running at top speed and jumping feet first between daddy's legs and being caught midair, at least until Jocelyne got too big for it. Since then, the after school ritual starts with a sprint, a leap into the air, a catch, and a hug. Jump hugs involve leaping from the stairs, the van, the dock, anywhere with height. All of these can turn into squeeze hugs—gripping as hard as possible; sometimes hard enough that they hang from me as though on a chin-up bar—or even tackle hugs, which are what they sound like. Moreover, Pascal and Jocelyne are as likely to end a Saturday night pillow fight by having a princess tea party, or vice versa. In fact, we have made sheet change part of this last “terdition,” as the kids say.¹ There is no better way to remove or stuff a pillow case than jumping on the bed. Making a massive jump pile is the best way to change the linens. I mention all this not because we imagine that it is in any way an ideal or a model approach to anything or to show how cool we are (my wife, Michelle, and I are over forty-five, with kids under ten: by definition, we can't be cool) or any of the obvious issues of discipline, energy control, etc. This is all about care, especially instilling an ethic of care in Pascal and with it a sense of self-in-relation, all of it. We play with care and we care about play (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Playing Xbox Kinect, with Pascal and me as a single player.

Moreover, each of these derives at least in part from having a father whose academic specialties include gender, sex, sexuality, especially as these appear in video games and play. My research focuses on the way the algorithmic kernel of the games maps onto cultural processes—including the development of masculinity—in and through play. Adaptation, in its many forms—as a learning strategy, as a pedagogical strategy, as a means of coping to changing demands, etc.—figures heavily in my chosen disciplines. Players need to adapt to the game, to each level or task, just as parents need to adapt to a child’s learning and capabilities. The best kinds of games are insistent and make you want to play. Parenting is insistent from the get-go, but where a game insists on collecting, building and discovering every last object, path or solution, parenting insists that you don’t miss any. Simply put, I was always going to care about gender roles and play and how one maps onto the other. Every semester, I ask my students which toys and games include aspects of teaching as a part of playing. This is a trick question because the answer is as simple as it is expansive: all of them. Here, I take my cue from one of the earliest studies of games, noted film and TV scholar Marsha Kinder’s look at the adaptation(s) of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles to a video game and toys. In considering the Oedipal dynamic created by an intertextual web, Kinder seemingly anticipates film scholar Robert Stam’s assertion, “Adaptation Studies itself has to ‘adapt’” to include new/digital media (Stam). Taken together, then, these insights point to the fact that meaning-making is an ongoing process and that no text is self-contained. As literature and digital media scholar Simone Murray asks quite

rhetorically, “is not adaptation the lingua franca of the twenty-first-century humanities (and to some extent the social sciences also)?” (Murray). My academic career, which was partly interrupted due to family need and institutional cutbacks, affords me greater opportunities to be at home when our children need extra care. This is particularly important given the fact that, since he was roughly eighteen-months-old, Pascal becomes sick every four-to-five weeks. While the meaning of care remains consistent, it has taken many different forms and many different embodiments.

The maladies have ranged from colds to hospitalization for liver dysfunction. He has needed tubes in his ears and has required therapy for speech and language delays due to hearing loss. The speech and language pathologists pointed us to some behavioural and physical therapists as well. Pascal has been tested more than once to see where, not if, he rests on the spectrum of Autism disorders. Michelle notes that one of the keys was establishing a space for Pascal “to remain sweet while still being very physical, in a way that would be playing too rough for anyone else, including mommy” (email to author). Indeed, one of the effects was to help establish formal and informal guidelines for both children so that they learned who could endure a squeeze hug, how hard to hug, and, most importantly, when it would be appropriate to do so. Pascal’s burgeoning masculinity is not the only area of concern as we attempt to navigate his socialization; indeed, that of both of our children. Here, it is important to distinguish between specialized needs and specific attention.

I am curiously situated—as a father but also as one of a few who combines Gender Studies, particularly masculinities, with Game Studies—to be the one to offer hugs, medicine, cuddles, etc., but to do so in a way that is always mindful of the (re)production of hegemonic masculinity, especially what noted sociologist R.W. Connell calls the “patriarchal dividend,” or the benefit accrued by men simply by virtue of fortuitous birth (116). In this last regard, the cautionary introduction of feminist theorist Andrea Doucet’s *Do Men Mother?* looms large, particularly as I as consider both my children’s needs, desires and development. Thus, psychologist Judy Chu’s *When Boys Become Boys*, which recognizes the potential for boys to develop a sense of self-in-relation serves as an important bookend to Chu’s mentor, the noted feminist psychologist, Carol Gilligan, in her seminal *In a Different Voice*.² Chu documents the ways that boys have their sense of connectedness—to each other and to others—driven out of them, or they, at least, learn to hide it. To be sure, this is an important finding, for it suggests that emotional distance is neither a pre-condition nor a requirement of becoming a man. Care can and needs to be a part and parcel of masculinity. Thus, we are making sure that Pascal never needs to learn or acquire an ethic of care. Instead, we are taking care to ensure that his is never extinguished. In so doing, we are also disrupting the determinism of play and games as mindless, leisure activities, or worse, aimless distractions.

While sex-role positions have given way to the greater understanding of gender as constructed and performative (following Judith Butler, Connell, Jack Halberstam and others), sex-role or difference readings still predominate not only in studies of parenting (both academic and popular) but also in studies of games, gaming, and play (Jenson & de Castell 53). Yet play, both as *ludus*—structured and with rules; here, including gender—and *paidia*—spontaneously and free-flowing; here, as bringing trucks to help make cookies (see Figure 2)—remains a powerful means of learning and of teaching in and through transtextual sources and methods.



Figure 2: Baking with trucks gives the perfect measure & plenty of practice.

As Stam points out, following from French theorist Gérard Genette, scholars recognize, “Adaptation is of course a paradigmatic form of transtextuality” (Stam). In game studies, the key is recognizing what game scholar Ben Egliston calls the “transtextual nature of competitive gaming [which] has made permeable the boundaries between play as leisure and play as labour” (Egliston). Indeed, a detailed examination of play, as ludus and as paidia, remains one key critical gap in Chu’s study. Thus, I remain mindful of feminist film theorist Tania Modleski’s considerations of the potential for “male mothering” to become an(other) opportunity to colonize and to marginalize women (19). Indeed, she noted these in analyses of films figuring fathers as sole or primary parents. At the same time, religious studies scholar Paul Nathanson and his mentor, Katherine Young’s *Spreading Misandry* and its sequels continue to find audiences among the “angry white men” Michael Kimmel and others carefully demythologize.³ As I argue, the political and the practical challenges regarding the (potential) deployment of (my own) masculinity shapes my parenting, as well as the various ways play can be (en)gendered.

Gamified Gender Play

When I was reading Chu's investigation, I was of several minds. I felt she was onto something but the study, by her own admission, was small and made me wish for more. I was immediately reminded of studies of masculinity, from Antony Easthope's classic popular study, *What a Man's Gotta Do* to Kimmel's ever-expanding roster. More importantly, I was reminded of my own son. I also recalled Montréal-based therapist Guy Corneau's observation that it "is almost as though our fathers are subject to a rule of silence that decrees that fathers who speak are a threat to male solidarity" (10).⁴ This is a reminder that rules are social or cultural and, therefore, are learned. They can also be manipulated; one can play with them. Contrary to many reports, parenting magazines, school teachers, academics, and her own mentor, Chu finds that there is nothing essentially male that causes boys to become differentiated and to operate as something other than relational selves:

In contrast to depictions of boys as being insensitive to emotions and incapable of or uninterested in developing close relationships [...] the capacity and the desire for close, mutual, responsive relationships that researchers have observed in infants are evident during early childhood as well (63)

Even Gilligan, in the foreword to Chu's study, now allows that there is nothing inherent in boys that causes the kind of behavior we saw occasionally from Pascal. Gilligan proclaims the insight as the study's biggest achievement, whereas we simply see it almost every day: "the relational insensitivity often associated with boys and men is not in fact part of their nature. It is the consequence of a renunciation they made in a desire to become one of the boys and the mark of a world in which the willingness to betray love is a proof of masculinity" (xii). However, the instances when this occurs need not be particularly dramatic. Rather, the mundane moments become especially important in terms of reinforcing or resisting these rules. This is precisely the reason play becomes so important in the process.

Too frequently, play is held as the opposite of work. In their essay on "The Gamework," my Learning Games Initiative colleagues, Judd Ruggill, Ken McAllister, and David Menchaca explain, "Gamers actively help create the narrative, thematic, and ideological structures that determine the artifactual experience. In so doing, gamers also reproduce or consent to ideologies embedded within games themselves. This, too, is a kind of work." (301). Indeed, Egliston's previously cited work on the symbiosis of play and work, in and through transtextual forms, follows from the same premise. This is important because the work being done also produces masculinity and depends on the rules and algorithms for that formation just as surely as it does those for the game. It is not surprising, then, that sociologist Roger Caillois uses *ludus* "to encompass the various games to which, without exaggeration, a civilizing quality can be attributed" (27). Despite the seeming paradox of play as work, *ludus* is perhaps more easily

understood than paidia. As Caillois explains, paidia is “a word covering the spontaneous manifestations of the play instinct” (27-8). In fact, he offers multiple and simultaneous descriptors, if not definitions. This is important for it should be understood as free-flowing, as the sort of behavior that leads to or contributes to imaginative action, make-believe, or the proverbial “free play.” Moreover, as game scholar Graham Jensen argues, it is the combination of user-defined goals and rewards that are external to the game that have “the potential to transform a paidic game into a ludic game” (73). In the case of gendered play with our children, the rewards are always already external to the game even as they occur within it. If the play includes—indeed, sometimes revolves around—the affirmation of a loving embrace, the rewards are multiple and simultaneous.

Here, it is important to note that while gamification is a current vogue, it is often misunderstood as being the same as “pointsification,” that is, merely attributing points to non-game elements. This over-emphasizes an outcome, the reward schedule, while largely ignoring the process. As Rolf Nohr, Dean of Design at the Braunschweig Institute of Art, relates, when properly understood and enumerated, “gamification can also be conceptualized as a process in which subjects are playfully stimulated to self-conduct by means of marginal formal and narrative parameters” (205). This definition, then, encompasses rules and recreation as much as it includes rewards. Indeed, these three elements form the very essence of digital culture theorist Espen Aarseth’s seminal conceptualization of games:

Any game consists of three aspects: (1) rules, (2) a material/semiotic system (a gameworld), and (3) gameplay (the events resulting from application of the rules to the gameworld). Of these three, the semiotic system is the most coincidental to the game. (46)

Tellingly, Aarseth plays on coincidence in both senses of the word; that is, he means to say that semiotic system appears or occurs at the same time and yet happens as if by chance, so that it is contingent to the game or gameworld itself. In Jesper Juul’s terms, this occurs because

The rules of a game provide the player with challenges that the player cannot trivially overcome. It is a basic paradox of games that while the rules themselves are generally definite, unambiguous, and easy to use, the enjoyment of a game depends on these easy-to-use rules presenting challenges that cannot be easily overcome. (5)

Moreover, it is a critical commonplace to think that paidia has no rules, but this is not the case; instead, the key is that paidia need not have a win condition. It is about the means rather than the end. For digital media theorist Diane Carr, adaptation is an important concern for scholars in game studies because they both entail “exploring the limits, choices and the strategies inherent to a situation [and] variables that are manipulated or experimented on” in the course of moving from one medium to another” (153). Said another way, playing is its own rationale and outcome. Thus, it becomes important to embrace rather than to eschew the paradoxical and/or the counter-intuitive aspects of play and of gender, for these run deep in both.

Playful Nurturing Through Nurturing Play

Game Studies can contribute to the study of gender, particularly through an understanding of a system based on constant surveillance, rules, and rewards. This becomes particularly important when considering games, play and developing children. For children's literature scholar Yiyin Laurie Lee, "transtexts can involve the developing features of video or computer games in a narrative that emphasizes players' interaction with a text: by interpreting hints provided in a game to solve problems, players map the game world as well" (87). In other words, the content and the mode of delivery become part of the performance in a transmedia network. One of the keys to the process is the in-built scaffolding—that is, adding and removing supports—of the medium, one which results from a game adaptation of a text and one which I frequently adapt from games. For example, on the occasion of the long-awaited first snowfall of his Senior Kindergarten year, Pascal and the other, mostly smaller, boys in his after school learning and play group—not all were present and this is key—made a snowman. It was tiny and took an hour to build because of how little snow there actually was. Michelle was about to take a picture when Pascal ran through the snowman and smashed it. He thought he was being funny but his look when he realized the horror reactions of everyone else told the story. He knew it wasn't funny immediately and went silent, refusing to talk about it, even later. Indeed, without citing Judith Butler's insights in "Melancholy Gender" (1995), Chu recognizes the same thing: masculinity is a melancholy formation because it exists in a world of cognitive dissonance. It is a formation that requires its practitioners to refuse and to deny their affiliations and connections, and yet deny that this hurts and produces a sense of loss. Although she is better known for her feminist readings of women's bodies, Susan Bordo argues that the bodily performance of masculinity produces a "double bind" through the simultaneous recognition and disavowal that men can be objects of surveillance (192). Pascal was all cognitive dissonance for the remainder of the day and into the next, until he rebuilt the snowman the following afternoon (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: The rebuilt snowman & the remnants of the original.

A day is a long time for a (then) five-year-old, especially one who understands any day before the current one as simply, “yesterday.” The absence of the other boys was key, too. These were the ones for whom, it seems, Pascal was substituting when he smashed the snowman. These are the ones he was resisting when he rebuilt it. Moreover, the act of redemption occurred in and through play.

Instances like this also account for our purchase of the popular video game, Minecraft—and accessories—for our children. Through play, they are learning to deal with failure, with making mistakes, with picking up and making corrections if necessary or possible, and moving on to the next task or adventure. As noted game theorist Jesper Juul explains in *The Art of Failure* (2013), one of the contradictory attractions of occasional struggles “is not simply that games or tragedies contain something unpleasant in them, but that we appear to want this unpleasantness to be there, even if we also seem to dislike it [. . .] a safe space in which failure is okay, neither painful nor the least unpleasant” (4). Simply put, there are benefits and every pleasures that can be derived from failures. As in the example of redemption, errors in a game allow for adaptation and opportunities to learn about learning. The relative safety of play, and the frequent absence of a win condition, makes games wonderful sites for learning. Steven Conway, a game design professor, notes, one of the key mechanisms of games is to alternate among hyper-ludic, contra-ludic, and hypo-ludic moments (2010, 2012). In other words, the games bestow players with additional capabilities, remove certain powers, or take them away

altogether. This typology effectively enumerates the instructional scaffolding that occurs through games and playing them. In this way, the games become important sources of repetition and rehearsal, particularly as counters to the learned helplessness normative socialization might engender.

Even an open-world, “sandbox” game like Minecraft still operates according to specific algorithms and rules. In addition, Minecraft features a cooperative creative mode, in which two or more players can explore the world, gather resources, and build new features. This list comprises three of the four basic actions of games; the last is a game’s insistence that you play. In this case, the insistence exists entirely in the “transludic space,” an interstitial space between and among players and the game (“Make Lemonade” 264). Moreover, the transludic space exists beside and outside the text even as it exists through text. As Murray relates, scholar traditionally have “declined to dignify such paratexts with the term “adaptations,” preferring to reserve the label for allegedly more substantial, stand-alone repackagings of a creative work such as a feature film or stage play. This overlooks, however, the way in which all paratexts are necessarily selective in their representation of a source text” (Murray). This is important because the transludic highlights the fact that games and play are always (already) social and relational activities. Importantly, this insight derives from moments when the experience of parenting and teaching intersect with my knowledge of play and gender. As before, the inverse is increasingly the case, too.

As an aside, too many times to count, a young woman came to my office upset with her grade but fearing I felt she was a C+, not the paper. The visit would take longer because of the time and care I had to employ so that we could get past that understandable presumption. I say understandable because, in this regard, Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice* and its findings have been tremendously helpful and illuminating—most of the time. In particular, Gilligan states that women experience “a world comprised of relationships rather than of people standing alone, a world that coheres through connection rather than through systems of rules” (29). Moreover, she observes that the girls she studies would rather stop playing a game if there were a dispute over rules; whereas boys would fight and still continue the game. It was not always the case, nor was it always the case that a young man felt that I was an imbecilic jerk for giving him a C+ when it should be obvious he was a star. One did tell me that he was a “big deal” around campus because he was on the frisbee squad and another scolded me for not replying soon enough to an email that was sent on a statutory holiday because his time was valuable and as a working man taking a summer course, he was beyond doing the “student thing.” For these men, it is a case of the world needing to relate to them and not vice versa.

In order to foster and sustain the self-in-relation in our children, the hugs in our house are always accompanied by kisses and reminders of “You know your daddy loves you” or “I love you big, big like the sky,” to which they know to fill in the ending, “but only much, much bigger.” Indeed each has added a touch to this multi-generational affirmation—adapting what my mother told my brother and me. Then, it became, “but only 100% bigger.” Moreover, the hugs combine the contradictory elements of (early) childhood masculinity and femininity. Jumps and leaps require confidence and courage, but also trust and love. While there is an investment and a contingent attachment involved in building Jocelyne’s Minecraft world, there is also one for Pascal’s Farming Simulator world. Mistakes might be made, but the game allows for reload and

replay. Saturday night pillow fight gives a sense of control and responsibility. Again, the combination of gender and play coincide. As Connell explains, gender identity exists at the intersection of structure and agency. So, too, does play. Indeed, Caillois stresses the ways in which ludus serves “to encompass the various games to which, without exaggeration, a civilizing quality can be attributed” (27). It is perhaps for this reason that ludus is more easily understood than paidia; yet, it is important to recall that the latter owes its etymology to the Latin for child. It is in the structure of games, then, that play reaches its potential rather than its limit.

Thus, each of us has a task in the bed making, and the playful pillow “clobbering” usually ends with a group hug. Pascal really does love tea parties and baking and playing with his sister’s Playmobil house. The toys sized for the house’s occupants are a particular fascination because he contemplates how the toys play with their toys and who would play with what. Thus, he plays with the dolls’ dolls, teddy bears, tractors, and trains in a kind of metaplay.⁵ Even at the parallel play stage, Pascal wanted to play with his sister, often asking her “Jocelyne, want to play trains with me?” or asking if he could play puzzle or fort building or tea party with her (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Princess tea party while watching the hockey game.

He wants to be connected. He wants to be a self-in-relation. The teacher with whom he relates the best and who best relates to him does so in part because she sings almost everything to the children in the class.⁶ Here, she is the one relying on adaptation and with it what Murray calls an “established facility with reading multiple mediums, and our new-found openness to the

significance of both texts and context” (Murray). At the very least, this establishes a relation immediately, one that is unique to each child as simply as the sound of each name in song.

Pascal takes risks and loves to run, jump, and roughhouse (within limits). Reinforced knees on pants are merely a challenge. When Pascal went through a rough patch at school—not listening, playing too roughly, being oppositional—we watched him carefully for several days. It turns out that he was actually upset by the behavior of the other boys in his class and by their rough play with the toys. Indeed, they had broken the favorite digger and dump truck with which the children excavated the schoolyard during recess time. He simply did not know—yet—how to resolve the cognitive dissonance of his being on the “boys team,” and his very clear knowledge and understanding that the boys were being too rough and too rowdy. Chu calls this the “mean team,” in which boys display solidarity with each other and difference from the girls, and very often the female teacher, particularly given the ways schools normalize strict separation of genders (67). With his teacher in concert, we suggested that she take advantage of his healthy tendencies rather than work against the disagreeable behaviors. For example, another seemingly rough patch presented itself in the form of hiding from his teacher during transitions between activities. It turned out, it was a game and a test. He was upset by the class’s practice for moving from Kindergarten to Gr. 1, particularly the shift from single to general dismissal. By playing with him, by watching his non-verbal cues, we learned that he was worried about becoming lost in the after-school crowd. He was worried about being separated. This moment echoes Doucet’s admonition about judging, measuring and evaluating from the wrong perspective.

Pascal wants to be a big helper, but he also wants to be a leader. Indeed, when we fill the blue or the black bags, he is the one to remind us which items are garbage and which properly go into the recycling. He is eager to show what he has learned. The bins that go to the curb are just bigger versions of the ones that came with his trucks. Thus, we explained these traits and behaviors to his teacher and the educational assistant assigned to his class. To their credit, they found ways to combine the need to help with the need to lead. Pascal also needs as much, if not more affirmation than he needs corrections. This speaks to the proportionality of negative feedback and/or results. Pascal’s love of trucks and tractors has become another of his modes of expressing his desire to connect and to help others. His favorite saying in this regard is to proclaim, “We are getting our work done.” Pascal’s language has been a challenge for a number of reasons. However, his heart hasn’t been in doubt at all. Pascal loves nothing better than to bring out his biggest trucks, or the best one for the particular job, to help out around the house and at school. It takes longer, but he gets to haul objects around the house, from towels to toilet paper to a cup of sugar and more, and sometimes he is “forklift Pascal” or “crane Pascal” when he unloads the items from his favorite toys. He used the headlights of his garbage truck in lieu of a flashlight to look under the dishwasher and the same garbage truck was used to clean up all of the wrapping paper after everyone was finished opening their gifts on Christmas morning. His dump truck and loader help put everything into the appropriate bags. He still collects Easter eggs with a truck instead of a basket, or with the basket on the flatbed of a truck.

Each of these instances might be mistaken easily for rough, boyish play. However, for Pascal, this is an expression of care. To borrow from Gilligan, it is a different kind of care: an active, embodied one, and not just an emotional one. Each of these instances also highlights the ways in which in paidia games can become ludic ones. Perhaps the best overall example of our

process occurs because Pascal always brings his trucks to the counter when we bake. This became an opportunity to work with him on the articulation of his s-blends; that is, words like, scoop, spoon, stir, spatula, scrape, scraps, slide, etc. Moreover, I can do so without him noticing it. At the very least, we are making good use of the fact that play revolves around three things: recreation, rewards, and rules. The last of these are as simple as the recipe on the card and as complex as the roles of the roster of trucks, not to mention the rhythm of the words (and their sounds) and the ritual of the overall routine. From the combination of speech and action to the anticipation of errors and the development of social skills, a pretty thorough-going instructional scaffolding can be stealthily put together around a little boy's incongruous insistence that his trucks comprise an integral culinary cohort. Baking with dad and eating chocolate chips poured from a dump truck is a lot more fun than having flashcards thrown at you. Yet, along the way, we end up hauling out spoons, stirring in the chips, and scraping the bowl with our spatulas. We also only use trucks that can help: the loader for scooping, the grader and the bulldozer for scraping, the steamroller for smoothing, as well as the dump trucks for pouring.

Ultimately, the most important part of the entire exercise is the routine: assemble the ingredients, collect the equipment needed, and follow the recipe. At each step along the way, Pascal gets an opportunity to practice the s-blends. His tendency had been to drop the initial "s" because he could not distinguish the beginning of that labial fricative from the static he was used to hearing. All of this might seem a lot of self-congratulatory rhetoric over a relatively quotidian practice; that is, until you take into account that it includes Pascal's additional needs for assistance in developing his grip strength and fine motor skills, which have been affected along the way, not to mention the next round of speech articulation and, as much as possible, his love of the number "5." Baking is just one of several activities that have been adapted. But with two hungry kids, there will always be baking in our house. This offers an opportunity for a cumulative, accretive process because we will squeeze, smush, and shape the dough, as well. Pascal's roller and loader, among others, will be equally important as we work on the "liquids"—i.e., L and R—which comprise another area that has been identified for directed attention. Thus, when Pascal licks the spatula once the cookies head to the freezer or to the oven, he practices all three subjects at the same time. Each builds on and reinforces the others.

Thus, adaptation has been more than just a concept, particularly over the last two years. We have moved from Canada to the United States in one of the most tumultuous periods of the last five decades. Pascal, especially took the move very hard. Although it was not all fun and games for us, providing a means of establishing a relationship with the new environment includes play at its core. Here the words of Lee, regarding children and (narrative) adaptation ring true: "Although Gerard Genette does not directly explore how multiple media may revolutionize narration, his idea of transtextuality may help illuminate the probable chemistry of 'narrative networks'—young people's relationships with narratives and with other people" (87). In making the move, one of the challenges was the Customs delay of all of our belongings. So, when we arrived at the new house, we set up a sofa bed, a small TV, an XBox and a few other items in the "frog," or Finished Room Above Garage. There are no basements in our area because of the proximity to the ocean. While Pascal misses the basement play area, he adapted to the frog because, despite its incomplete fidelity, it offers a place and a space he can define himself, especially through play.

The adoption of the frog as a locus of play recall film scholar Courtney Lehman's insights regarding gender and adaptation. She explains, "Rather than thinking about adaptation as a semi-random, semi-autonomous act of repetition without replication, I prefer to think of it as a mechanism of reclamation and recovery" (Lehman). Incorporating lessons and methods from transtextual media—theory and practice—into our teaching helps give Pascal an immediate sense of connectedness to his new home. In fact, this built on and adapted an earlier strategy of fostering a self-in-relation, thereby confirming that recovery and recuperation occur at what Lehman calls "the point at which adaptation ceases to become a negotiation with the past and instead becomes a broker of possible futures." Most profoundly, the goal is not just to recuperate errors, missteps, struggles, etc. The goal must be a recuperation of masculinity, away from the toxic masculinity that has been a product of and has helped to produce the incredibly disturbing rise in overt, aggressive and even violent racism, misogyny, and homophobia of the Trump era. Simply put, masculinity must adapt positively—for a change—and this is how.

Conclusions

Run hugs, jump hugs, squeeze hugs and, yes, tackle hugs each embody in theory and in practice the joy of embracing—not reconciling or extinguishing—the duality instead of treating it as a contradiction (see Figure 5).



Figure 5: Jumping into a hug instead of the deep end.

Indeed, this last is the conclusion that I find missing in Chu, in Gilligan, in the studies they too find lacking, and in their antecedents. Too frequently these behaviors, and the genders to which they are ascribed, are studied, detailed and described as fixed, as oppositional, and as binaries. Moreover, Doucet finds that the “overwhelming majority of studies on domestic life are framed by a search for equal parenting or equal divisions of labor” (26). Instead of an exercise in accounting, we have looked to see what advantages our sometimes similar as well as decidedly different capabilities might offer. As film scholar Laurence Raw relates, adaptation needs to be part of our pedagogy, for the goal of an active literacy “can only be achieved if we adapt our pedagogic techniques; instead of relying on the information-loaded lecture and/or PowerPoint presentation, we have to be prepared to engage with our learners both inside and outside the classroom” (Raw). In my case, it just happens that the academic life affords me enhanced opportunities to be with my kids, as well as the benefit of observing, analyzing, and articulating what I almost inevitably will contemplate completely. Play, gender, and gendered play as are equally ineluctable parts of childhood and my research.

I have learned from studying games and play that good games are insistent; they make you want to play; they involve exploring and building, sometimes simultaneously, and they include lots of collecting. Who doesn’t want to collect a hug and build trust, while safely exploring the limits of that trust? In our house, every day ends with the ritual of both children “hiding on” Mom (or Dad). This came about because I decided to respond to a child’s obstinate

bedtime refusal by saying, “Fine, I’m going upstairs, and I’m hiding.” Eventually, it became a race. If we find their hiding spot, they have to change, brush their teeth, pick a story and go to bed. Every night is different, but every night is the same. Everyone plays every time. We seize as many of those moments as we can. Thus, baking with the children has been a lesson for us in precisely what constitutes a teachable moment, in how and where these actually arise, in the difference between rote and routine, and in the importance of adapting not so much to “learning style,” but rather to the whole learner. Teaching need not even be noticeable let alone overt, or worse, didactic. Thus, I am certain that the study of games and play has much to contribute to the study of gender and children and not the other way around. Here, I am reminded of Espen Aarseth’s axiom that the “gameworld is its own reward” (51). What a nice way to describe a hug.

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Endnotes

1 For the sake of space and at some risk, I have focussed on parenting Pascal because it has been done very carefully and knowingly as a counter to the “toxic” masculinity that confronts us daily, especially as the misogyny of #gamergate and the activism of #metoo reveal. Both of these campaigns directly impact the fields in which I teach and research. I have saved the material regarding the ways we foster Jocelyne’s bodily sovereignty for another paper.

2 To be sure, and lest there be any doubt where I stand academically (and personally), I have taken Nathanson and Young to task in reviewing their books. For example, please see http://www.academia.edu/1955611/Review_Essay_of_Paul_Nathanson_and_Katherine_K._Younghs_Spreading_Misandry_The_Teaching_of_Contempt_for_Men_in_Popular_Culture.

3 In this regard, my own father, an English teacher by trade, manages as much as one word, “special,” can handle. Michelle’s father, an engineer who was a pioneer in digital communication, does not have so much as a singular “go to” word or phrase. They are of a time.

4 Here, I am reminded of Barthes’ classic discussion of “Toys” in *Mythologies*, particularly the preparatory aspect of toys and the experience of play as embodied and as aesthetic.

5 Clearly, this technique is worthy of its investigation, most notably because Pascal’s speech and language challenges are less noticeable when singing. Indeed, this last is a well-documented phenomenon, but not one that has a great deal of literature in early childhood education.

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